

## All That's Left

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July 31, 2015:

Fly back to New York on a steamy, popsicles and shorts summer day. Your body smells of sweat and hotel soap. Your brother is hoarding magnets and keychains in his navy blue duffel bag. He puts his headphones on and listens to music you can't make out as he drifts in and out of sleep.

A friend once told you that a life cogently revisited is the only kind of life worth living. He said, "Start with the present and work your way back if you want to get the details right." Question this, but commit to following his advice anyway. Make a list of events you remember.

July 17, 2015:

In Amsterdam, take naps in the middle of the day. Rent expensive boats. As you walk down a busy street, whisper in your brother's ear, "I'm getting lost in this crowd. Everyone here is so tall. They look like a bunch of Vikings."

"I know," your brother whispers back, "Dutch people are always biking."  
Late at night, haunt back alleys asking strangers their opinions on cats and gyros.

Your father calls to say, "Lola, when are you coming home?"

Say, "Haven't we talked about this? I'll be back at the end of the month."

Your brother reminds you that your father's memory isn't what it used to be. He gets tired easily. He has thin arms and radiation scars around his neck.

July 5, 2015:

Your cousin, the English major, gives birth to a dark-haired girl so small that her father can hold her in a single hand. Your mother promises to send pictures soon.

Trudge through shopping centers with your brother. Stare curiously and longingly at children in strollers.

June 30, 2015:

On a bus ride to Amsterdam, pass through stretches of farmland. You are jotting notes in the margins of your novel when your brother pokes you on the side, “Look over there. Those are cows, I think.”

Say, “Those *are* cows.”

“Look who’s a zoologist all of a sudden,” your brother snorts.

June 24, 2015:

Your brother lands in London.

When he asks, “What do you usually do for fun around here?” tell him that you go for walks until your feet hurt.

“That’s dumb,” your brother says.

Say, “So you think you have better ideas?”

“Sure.”

“Name one.”

“For starters, you could lose some weight around your hips.”

June 17, 2015:

Give up on being an ex-pat; it requires more determination than you have.

Tell your mother that you're moving back to New York. She asks if you'd like to stay with her and your dad while you settle in. "You can live here for as long as you need," she says. It's not ideal, but you're low on cash, so you say, "I'll take you up on that."

Call your younger brother who is now in college and has never been to Europe. Say, "I'm coming home soon, but before I do, I want you to visit me. My treat."

"I thought you didn't have any money," your brother says.

Tell him, "I don't have much."

"You know, it wouldn't kill you to act responsibly every now and then," your brother says, but he doesn't turn down your invitation.

Book tickets to Amsterdam and New York.

#### June 11, 2015:

Go to see the gynecologist for an abortion. When you enter the exam room, the doctor's assistant will say, "Take off all your clothes, including your bra."

Mutter, "You're not even going to ask me to dinner first?"

The assistant shakes her head, forehead scrunched in disapproval. Admit that this was not most original joke.

Later that evening, get in a cab. When the driver asks if you're feeling okay, tell him, "I'm okay." Moments later, add, "I've heard it really hurts to have a baby."

Before you get home, ask the driver to make a stop for a vanilla milkshake.

#### June 10, 2015:

Take an at-home pregnancy test. When the result is positive, bite your thumb and scream, "Shit!"

Your grandmother once said, "If you have your children when you're young, you can grow up with them," but this is not what you mean to do.

Your grandmother also advised against falling in love too soon and wearing brassieres to sleep, lest you find yourself “feeling trapped.”

May 21, 2015:

That first night, after you see your boyfriend kissing someone else, sob until night becomes morning. Cry with such conviction you’d give any high school theatre chick a run for her money. Think one thousand stupid thoughts a night, every last one about him.

Run an Internet search for “how to cast a spell using his toothbrush,” which is all that’s left.

Call your brother in the middle of the night. He says, “Huh? I don’t understand. Why do you care about that guy? What could you possibly want from someone like that?”

May 20, 2015:

Strange things keep happening to you. At a rooftop bar in Peckham, where you find yourself feeling dowdy and out of place, spot your boyfriend with his arms draped around a blonde. She is long-limbed and gazelle-like. She runs her hands over her freckled skin with carefree indifference.

When he leans in to kiss her, you don’t know where to turn your eyes. It makes you want to shoot yourself in the face. It makes you want to grow another face, so you can shoot yourself in that one too.

Hide beneath a table. Take another sip of your non-alcoholic drink. Wince because there’s too much lemon in your soda. Ask no one in particular, “Since when does he date women his own age? Since when does he like blondes?”

A man in a Hawaiian shirt stands a few feet away. He dips his head down to say, “Oh honey, everyone likes blondes.”

Drive your nails into your own skin. Concentrate on the patches of stubble on your legs, the discontented rumbling of your unfed stomach.

Perhaps these aren't strange things at all. Perhaps this is just life.

May 13, 2015:

Your period is still late. Run Internet searches for “chances I am pregnant” and “male pattern baldness and the rain.” Decide how soon you will need to see a gynecologist.

Think of how you will let him know.

May 9, 2015:

Something shifts, though you're not sure what; it might be atmospheric. Out of nowhere, he begins to call your name, and when you look at him, he says, “Nothing.”

As you make love, ask what he is thinking.

“This is not romantic,” he will preface, “but I was thinking about how much my boss makes per day, and how much of that I earn for her. I'm trying to calculate how long it will take me to make more than she does.”

Think: *This is what I get for sleeping with a conservative.*

“What are you thinking?” he asks.

“Meta-thinking. It was getting too hazy, and now I've lost it.”

Your mother leaves a voice message on your phone. She says, “You never call me anymore.”

May 4, 2015:

Your period is late. Make a note of this in your planner.

April 17, 2015:

Late in the evening, he comes over to see you.

He talks about his new shampoo and falls asleep on your lap, lost between kissing your hands and not paying attention to the movie you're supposed to be watching, even though he chose it.

Before the movie ends, massage his scalp gently, a technique that feels practiced and well researched. Run your fingers through his wiry, inch-long curls. His black hair is already going gray.

When he leaves the following morning, he takes his shorts and his spare T-shirt with him.

#### April 10, 2015:

Your grandmother on your father's side, dead for over a year now, lived in New York for most of her life, but never picked up the accent.

Months before she passed, she started giving her belongings away one by one: her novels and DVDs, all the necklaces and rings in her black jewelry box, her good frying pan. It was as if she didn't trust anyone to do this for her.

#### March 2015:

There are nights when you watch the pulsating movements of his chest, the curl of his toes, and think you could never love anyone but him.

Sleep at his place so often that his roommate asks you to pay rent.

When your father calls, tell him that you have started seeing someone.

Don't be surprised when your father's first question is whether your new boyfriend is married.

Say, "If he does have a wife, he certainly doesn't spend very much time with her."

Your father will respond, "That's all I can ask for, honey. That's great."

#### February 2015:

Spend an entire morning in bed discussing your scars.

On your forehead, there's a scar from a childhood fall that involved a peach, a book, a rock, and a family hike through Vermont — a scar he calls "lovely." On your hands, there is a scar from a time when you became so enraptured in texting that you lost track of time and space and walked into a pole.

On his knees, there is a scar from failing to make a clean sweep over a fence. On his upper arm, there is a scar where his sister burned him with a curling iron. By his left eye, there is a scar where a stranger banged his head against a brick wall while making anti-Semitic remarks, though he is not Jewish.

January 28, 2015:

Sit on benches in Hyde Park. When the ducks go by, he confides that he's afraid of birds. He buries his head in your jacket sleeve.

Go window-shopping. Hold his hands and tell him to look away when you come across items featuring penguins or owls or songbirds. He closes his eyes and plays along, allowing you to guide him.

January 8, 2015:

Meet him the old-fashioned way: when you're exhausted and feeling bloated, walking aimlessly and drinklessly around a crowded bar. He will stand outside smoking a cigarette, holding a pack that says "Smoking Kills."

Stare at him for a little too long, mesmerized by the sight of it — the way the scene might have been stolen from a movie.

"Do you want to share?" he asks.

"I'm Lola, not Cher," you say.

Later that night, he'll send you a text saying, "Are you ready to Cher now?" and just like that, it's even. You have both told the same bad joke.

January 7, 2015:

The morning of your flight to London, pack your gifts, sweaters, and novels in a single suitcase.

Cry for the first four hours of the seven-hour flight. The man sitting to your right will roll his eyes and blow his nose and ask to have his seat changed.

December 20, 2014— January 7, 2015:

For the holidays, go back to New York. The plane tickets cost nearly as much as you make in a month.

Visit friends, relatives, and children you once babysat. Hand out postcards and tins of biscuits. Let your little cousins play with your hair. Tell jokes about English accents and the rain.

On New Year's Eve, spend the night at home with your parents. At midnight, kiss your mother's dog on the mouth.

December 13, 2014:

Walk through the city streets at night. Peer through display windows. Take mental notes on the clothes, though you've never been much for fashion. Watch families sitting together at restaurants. Pay attention to the dishes they order, the way they hold their forks. Wish you'd never learned what it feels like to stand outside a window, gazing in.

December 6, 2014:

On an unusually rainy night, meet the physics student on the corner of Kingsland Road and Lee Street. Hoist your umbrella as high as you can, so that it covers his head as



well as yours. After a moment of restless silence, the physics student asks what's on your mind. Tell him you've enjoyed getting to know him, but that ultimately, he is like a brother to you.

The physics student says, "Wow, you really have a funny idea of how you're supposed to kiss your brother, don't you? Then he adds, "You're unbelievable. Don't text me again," though he has always been the one to text you first.

Look him in the nose and say, "So I guess this means you don't want to adopt a cat with me?" Your hands are so cold that wonder if the precipitation might turn to frost.

He shakes his head. "I don't want to adopt anything with you. Nothing. Ever. That's it. I'm finished."

"Don't you at least want to find out what happened to Pocahontas?"

He looks at you and parts his lips as if you have just said the dumbest thing he has ever heard.

#### December 3, 2014:

For your fourth date, meet the physics student at the bottom of the spiral staircase in Hatchards, which he says is his favorite bookstore.

As you leaf through the staff picks, he asks, "Where do you see the two of us going?"

Respond, "I thought you said we were going to a restaurant."

When his cheeks turn red, it occurs to you that he was posing an ontological question. Sometimes, it is as if you are speaking different languages.

He asks, "Would you ever consider dating someone else?"

Say, "Definitely." Moments later, revise your answer: "I mean, I suppose."

#### December 1, 2014:

Lie on the physics student's bed, reading his old diaries. When you get to an entry about a boy he was sweet on during his time at boarding school, he interrupts you. "Does

Pocahontas end up with that white guy? I've watched the Disney version, but I can't remember how it ends."

Say, "Which white guy? There were so many."

He says, "The main one."

November 27, 2014:

At a poetry reading in Stockwell, cradle your copy of *Tenth of December*. Between speakers, catch the gaze of a man in an oversized sweater.

He says, "I'm a fan of American writers too. I guess you could say that I'm a Yankophile."

Say, "I guess you could say that I'm a Yank."

Talk about Amy Bloom, Jami Attenberg, and Sam Lipsyte. Exchange anecdotes about the most half-baked plans you've ever made: a PhD in physics in his case, and moving to London in yours.

That night, in his flat, he gives you a bowl of soup that burns your tongue.

November 24, 2014:

Run into the banker in a coffee shop. He asks questions about your day and offer to buy you a cup of tea. Tell him that he can buy you all the tea in the world, but that he will still remain guilt-tea.

Exasperatedly, he sighs, "Stop with the wordplay, Lola. Is this all a game to you?"

Return to your seat and bury your face behind a newspaper, or better yet, decide to walk out the front door. When the banker goes to the bathroom, dip out of the shop, leaving your unfinished croissant on the table.

November 21, 2014

Ask the banker why he doesn't talk to you about his family or what he's reading anymore. His texts have suddenly turned *logistical*. Say, "Don't look at me as if I am being unreasonable. I want to have real conversations."

The banker says, "I'm seeing someone. You must have known that. Didn't you?"

He laughs as you try to keep your lips from quivering.

"Lola," he coos, "You're upset. I didn't think you were that kind of girl."

Get dressed as quickly as you can. Mutter, "I need to get out of here." Throw your necklace in your bag because you can't be bothered to toy with the clasp.

Run out of his hall, across the hall, and down the staircase. Try to ignore the fact that you are making a scene, and that your face looks stupid when you run, and that leaving this way makes you look like you were poorly raised, a member of a barbaric New York stock.

The banker will chase after you wearing nothing but a white robe so long and soft you're sure it was stolen from a hotel. He'll tell you that you're making a mistake. He seems confident about that. He'll also tell you that you need him, and you'll shout, "I have never kneaded you," because you want to tell the truth.

#### November 14, 2014:

At an Indian restaurant, where you've unimaginatively ordered chicken tikka masala and vegetable rice, the banker says, "All of you post-religious East Coast intellectuals are exactly the same."

Mull over these words as you stab your peas. Imagine that it is the banker's head on the plate before you.

#### November 10, 2014:

Sleep with a banker you meet by the discounted snacks in the supermarket. He tells you that he lives in the neighborhood, just like you. He ends up spending the entire night

lying on your covers, wearing his long-sleeved shirt, talking about his father, whom he only describes in French.

He is sad and over a decade older than you. Tell yourself he is defective because you found him in the sales section.

November 7, 2014:

Your cousin, the English major, announces that she is pregnant. She graduated 14 years ago, but the fact remains: she spent her early twenties with the Gothic, the Victorian, and all the major poets.

November 5, 2014:

For your birthday, go to an art gallery alone. Strike up a conversation with a lanky man with skin so fair that his hands seem to disappear into the wall. Ask him to share his date of birth, astrological sign, and primary sources of dissatisfaction. Explain that this is for “research.” Do not, under any circumstances, ask his last name. This is good for your emotional well-being. This ensures you will not get attached.

That night, in your room, he will shout, “Who’s your daddy, kid? Who’s your daddy?” and “your Mexican ass is mine.” Do not bother to tell him that you are not Mexican. He twists your arm and asks, “Does this hurt?” Instead of saying, “I’m sorry,” like your college boyfriend would have, he twists your arm some more and says, “good.” Wish you didn’t know that men had thoughts like these.

October 2014:

Call your brother in the middle of the night.

Ask, “Can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“I’m so lonely I think I might die.”

“I don’t think you can die from loneliness,” he’ll respond before hanging up.

September 2014:

Go to St. James’s Park, the British Museum, and Catherine Street alone. In Little Venice, buy prosciutto sandwiches and black olives. Eat them on the street.

When people from home start to ask how you are, talk about your theory on male pattern baldness and the rain. If they press for more, talk about how close you live to the Thames. As a last resort, say, “The word ‘pants’ means ‘underwear’ here. If you tell someone, ‘Those pants look great on you,’ they’ll assume you are being a complete creep.”

Do not mention that you aren’t making friends.

You haven’t had a single drink in weeks.

August 24, 2014:

Put all your essentials in a single suitcase. Tell your brother he can have your bamboo plant, and if he doesn’t want it, he should throw it in the trash.

Promise your mother that you will call home often.

Don’t talk to your father about his upcoming medical appointments. When he drives you to the airport, readjust his slouchy collar. Tell him you’d like to stop for vanilla milkshakes before your flight.

June 2014:

Spend an inordinate amount of time in bed. Your brother says that it’s time to stop playing dead. He doesn’t understand how it could be so difficult to get your day started. “Wash your sheets, take a shower, put some clothes on, and get out of the damn house,” he barks.

Your mother asks, “Where did all this despair come from?” It is like being asked. “What is the meaning of life?” or “Why do most relationships fall apart?”

April 12, 2014:

At the funeral, when you are kneeling by your grandmother's casket, your cousin walks up to you, gestures towards the back of the room, and says, "That's one of the biggest problems out there. Black people getting black tattoos. You can't even see the ink."

He is wearing sunglasses, but you know he is high out of his mind. He is much too sorry for a lecture, so you stay silent.

April 10, 2014:

The week after Easter, your grandmother dies in the middle of the night. It is like waking up to find that your belly button has vanished.

There are meditation mantras you practice. *Om. Lokah. Saha.* Repeat these words while wrapped under your covers at night, in the darkness of your own room. These sounds once soothed you, but they don't work now. You don't have any words for this.

April 2, 2014:

Your grandmother says, "I think I had a stroke," though your father and her doctors assure her that she didn't.

Then she says, "Well, I'm sure I had another leg. They're cutting me into piece, damn it! They're doing it bit by bit."

Over the last eighteen months, there have been three amputations: first her right foot, then her right leg, and now, toes on the one foot that remains.

Your grandmother says, "This is all that's left," as you place your sallow hand above her stump.

March 2014:

Call your father as you walk from your house to the train station. He'll tell you that your uncle is too grumpy to tolerate. They have both spent five hours at the hospital today. Listen to the frustration in your father's voice. In your head, repeat this mantra: "Release anger. Release anger. Free yourself from anger."

Your senior thesis on addiction narratives in contemporary American fiction is not what you hoped it would be. Two months before graduation, realize that your research is bogus. It feels like the intellectualization of a personal problem.

Read books until you realize that novelists don't understand shit themselves. The revelation overwhelms you; your habit of reading fiction is even more worthless than you thought. Your dream of becoming a writer is scrapped again and again.

February 2014:

Show up late for a date at the Italian restaurant, the big place on Chapel Street. You haven't been on a date in months. You haven't had more than four hours of sleep in days. You underestimated the rain and made the seven-minute walk without an umbrella. You are not at your best. Neither is your hair.

When you finally reach your table, your date says, "Hey, I was just about to order a bottle of red wine for us." His hands are daintier than you remembered.

Say, "I'm sorry. I'm a sober alcoholic."

He asks, "What's the difference between an alcoholic and a sober alcoholic?"

Tell him, "A bottle of red wine."

The date ends disastrously. When you get up to leave, reach out for a hug. He moves back and shakes your hand, which you hadn't realized was an option. But this is why you came to college: to learn!

That night, when you're cold, sober, still drenched from the rain, and unable to sleep, draft a story about thwarted romance and failed ambitions. Send it to your fiction professor.

January 2014:

For the New Year, give up alcohol. You'll sit in the living room in your grandmother's house crying as you plan your year of sobriety out, which is how you know that you really need to go through with it. It's fucking scary to love anything as much as you love alcohol.

Your first week of sobriety is a hard one. You shake nervously at dinner tables with your parents' friends when no one offers you a drink. There are headaches in the evening. You can't fall asleep at night without pressing your face against the pillow.

Your mother says, "Your life would be manageable if you weren't determined to prove that it is not."

November 2013:

The night of your twenty-first birthday, go to an out-of-the way bar.

At dusk, wake up to find your brother and your roommate hovering around you, encouraging you to take sips of water.

Say, "The call to drink is strong."

No one smiles.

Get three hours of sleep. For breakfast, eat a grapefruit with a spoon.

October 2013:

Call your brother, a freshman in college, to ask if you can spend the night with him.

"Hold on," he will tell you, and to his roommate, you will hear him say, "My sister is on the phone. She wants to spend the night here. She says she hasn't washed the beer out of her hair in days."

That night, when you arrive at your brother's dorm, he ushers you into his room quickly, and walks with his head bowed, so you can feel the weight of his disappointment.



Check the self-help websites. The trouble is that they don't do shit unless you plan to give up drinking.

#### September 2013:

Beginning of the fall semester. Run into your ex-boyfriend at an off-campus party full of drunk freshmen and tall, charming athletes. He taps you on the shoulder. "Hey, how have you been?" he asks. "Do you have time to talk?"

Tell him that you can offer a listening ear, but only one.

He says, "Then forget about it, Lola. You haven't changed at all. And besides," he adds, "it's not like I wanted to get back together."

"Together?" you ask, in a voice that sounds too small to be yours.

#### August 2013:

Your ex-boyfriend calls you, lonely one night, from Chicago. He says, "You hurt me, Lola," and the simple honesty of his words threatens to crush you.

Because you are not the apologizing type, say, "When did I ever promise I wouldn't do that?"

He hangs up.

#### July 2013:

Quit your summer job to focus on your writing. End your relationship to focus on your drinking. Practice braiding your hair, speaking French, and telling jokes to audiences of one.

Your seven-year-old cousin asks, "Are you an alcohol attic?"

Say, "What makes you think that?"

Your cousin says, "My mom."

The phrase “alcohol attic” makes you think of people sitting around almost motionless in dusty rooms, turning through pages of old photographs. As it turns out, this is almost exactly right.

June 2013:

Flirt with the idea of attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Consider breaking up with your boyfriend. Write him long letters that you do not intend to send.

May 2013:

Go back to New York for the summer. Your boyfriend goes to Chicago.

During your first week at home, get kicked out of a nightclub for trying to steal pieces of crystal from the chandelier.

The bouncer says, “You’re probably underage and you’re definitely out of control.”

Because you’re not sure what else to tell him, mumble, “You’re right.”

March 2013:

The depression deepens. People can read it on your face. Friends and friends of friends say that you look like shit, by which they promise they mean “like no offense.”

Your parents find you drunk after their dinner party and drunk in the parking lot of a supermarket and drunk on your bedroom floor. When your mom reminds you that you promised you were only going out for appetizers, respond, “but you know how I like to order the all-you-can drink.”

February 2013:

Your boyfriend thinks you've hit a slump because you've been listening to too much indie rock. You think you've hit a slump because you have poor taste in boyfriends. You can't believe you're dating someone who talks about club music like it's Prozac. In the middle of the night, tell your boyfriend that you think you might be having a panic attack.

He moves your hair away from your face and asks, "Have you considered going to the living room or sitting on the floor?"

It turns out he's wrong about this. He's also wrong about the number of justices on the Supreme Court, Britney Spears's age, and the year of the first moon landing. He doesn't know how to close the lid on the Tupperware; he doesn't know how to do anything.

#### January 1, 2013:

For New Year's Eve, go to your grandmother's house. As you watch re-runs of true crime TV, she asks, "Lucy, when are you going to get married?"

Say, "Nanna, I'm twenty."

She responds, "My point exactly."

#### December 2012:

Out of nowhere, strangers begin to approach you to speak about prayer and religion. While you're walking to poetry class, a man stops to ask if you've considered becoming Hindu. He thrusts a copy of a book about Krishna in your hands. "Everyone needs a community," he says.

One week later, a woman spots you in a coffee shop and asks if you are in need of prayer. She wraps her hands around yours and asks if there is anything in particular that is troubling you.

"I can't say," you tell her, by which you mean that you have no clue.

Your therapist says, "Nothing will work until you're ready."

November 2012:

Your grandmother's right leg is amputated.

When you go to the hospital to visit, she says, "Lucy, you are the one who is always with me. Even when you are away, you are with me." Lock your eyes on the gelatin, which is discolored, pale beige, gooey and trembling, a mass that looks bodily.

Your name is Lola. Lucy is her dog's name.

Do not mention this.

May 2012:

Spend whole weekends drunkenly roaming the streets, misplacing your keys, forgetting to charge your phone, wishing you had left your window open.

Lock yourself out of your room so many times that the people who work in the campus security office begin to recognize your voice.

A man on the other end of the phone says, "This is your third call this week."

Say, "Who? Me? Are you sure?"

April 2012:

Brush your hair in the common room while your roommate stands by your desk, rummaging through your books.

"Who did you highlight all the passages about growing old?" she asks.

Whisper, "I don't know," as if you're answering a question you asked yourself.

March 2012:

Visit your grandmother in the hospital. The skin on her thighs is freckled, dimpled, and roped with veins. She has cat eyes and a charming lisp. You cannot pronounce her first name.

When the two of you are alone, your grandmother tells you stories about her childhood. She talks about silent films, the Dust Bowl, World War I, the invention of the smallpox vaccine, Woodrow Wilson's election. She says, "It made me tough." She grits her teeth.

Everything you know about your grandmother would fit on a single page, but even so, you do know her age, and you know something about these events. You know that every last one happened before she was born. Listen carefully, though you know that what she is saying is impossible.

Smile and nod. Try your best to look calm.

#### January 2012:

Declare the English major. Line your bookshelves with copies of *Paradise Lost*, *On the Road*, *The Faerie Queene*. Every morning, read until your head spins.

#### December 2012:

After your semester abroad, spend the holidays with your family.

On your first night back, your dad wakes up in the middle of the night screaming, "Shit! Who turned the TV off?"

Go to his room and ask, "What's wrong?"

He says, "They were talking about PS 209."

"PS 209?"

"That's where I went to school."

"Dad, the TV wasn't on."

"It was on a minute ago."

Shake your head. "You were sleeping."

Your mom looks up at you and says, "Lola, it's fine. This happens all the time."

October 2012:

At dusk in Paris, on your bus ride home, find yourself seated across from an Algerian woman old enough to be your mother. She will tell you that you are enough, that your life will work itself out. Wonder why you need this. Wonder why you are listening to her.

June 2011:

Your father becomes weaker after radiation. The treatments make him thinner. His neck is wrinkled, scarred, covered in skin that looks burned and red. Your mother tells you that he needs a glass of water on his bedside table every night. He falls asleep, suddenly, on trains and in the middle of conversations. Sometimes, he falls asleep on his way to appointments and ends up in Queens. Milkshakes are his only comfort.

“I drink a milkshake everyday,” he says, as if this is a motto to live by.

Decide to extend your stay in Europe. Make plans to attend the fall semester abroad.

May 12, 2011:

Your father tells you that he has been diagnosed with cancer. In four days, you are scheduled to leave for France.

August 2010:

Your freshman fall in college, take English classes, like your cousin. Gorge on dining hall food until your hips become plump and unfamiliar.

Sign up for the intensive intermediate French class. Stay up late listening to audio recordings. Practice pronouncing the vowels in “huit.”

Apply for a summer program in Paris.

June 2010:

Finish high school. Cut your hair. Write letters to everyone you know. Promise your mother that you will never try marijuana or have casual sex.

June 2004:

Wake up early to straighten your hair and apply burgundy lipstick.

Your mother gives you her best advice: “For God’s sake, stop acting ugly, Lola.”

Decide that in ten years, you will live alone in an apartment filled with books.

August 2003:

Your family vacation this year is a five-day hiking trip in Vermont. Sneak off to read on a rock. Fall on your face while you are eating a peach. The collision will leave a gash on your forehead, a cut that will eventually become a scar that will never go away.

Insist on finishing the peach.

September 2001:

The Twin Towers fall, first in real time, and then over and over again on your TV screen until the image of the burning buildings is engraved on your mind. Distant relatives you’ve never heard of call to see if your father, who once was a New York City firefighter, is okay. They haven’t heard that he’s out on disability. They don’t know about his accident, the one that screwed his back, neck, and ribs, but probably saved his life.

All talk shows turn to the same topic: the tragic deaths.

Hear the word “terrorism” for the first time.

December 2000:

After dinner, your mother says, “Stay here. Talk to me.” Whether you walk away to play hopscotch or study for a spelling test, know that you have abandoned her just the same.

February 1999:

Call to wish your grandmother a happy birthday. After you finish singing the birthday song, ask, “Nanna, when are you going to die?”

Your grandmother says, “I’m not sure.”

When the call is over, your mother pulls you by your ear and says, “What the hell is wrong with you? Haven’t I taught you how to speak?”

July 1998:

Your dad falls in a burning building. For the weeks that follow, he must wear a brace around his neck. Call him “Frankenstein” because he tells you to.

June 1995:

Your brother is born. Your father takes your plush toys: your three little bears, your centaur, your piglet. He places them in the baby’s nursery.

The next time you see your mom, ask her if it hurts to have a baby. Ask why the baby needs your centaur.

When your brother comes home from the hospital, find that he is dumb and pink and doesn’t know how to talk.

October 1994:

Twirl locks of your mother’s golden hair, which is so much like a mystery you can touch with your very own hands.



November 1992:

Bill Clinton is elected President of the United States.

Your mother gives birth after thirty-six hours of labor.

Your parents drive you home from the hospital, and on the way there, find themselves in a head-on collision. Everyone survives. Only your mother is hurt.